

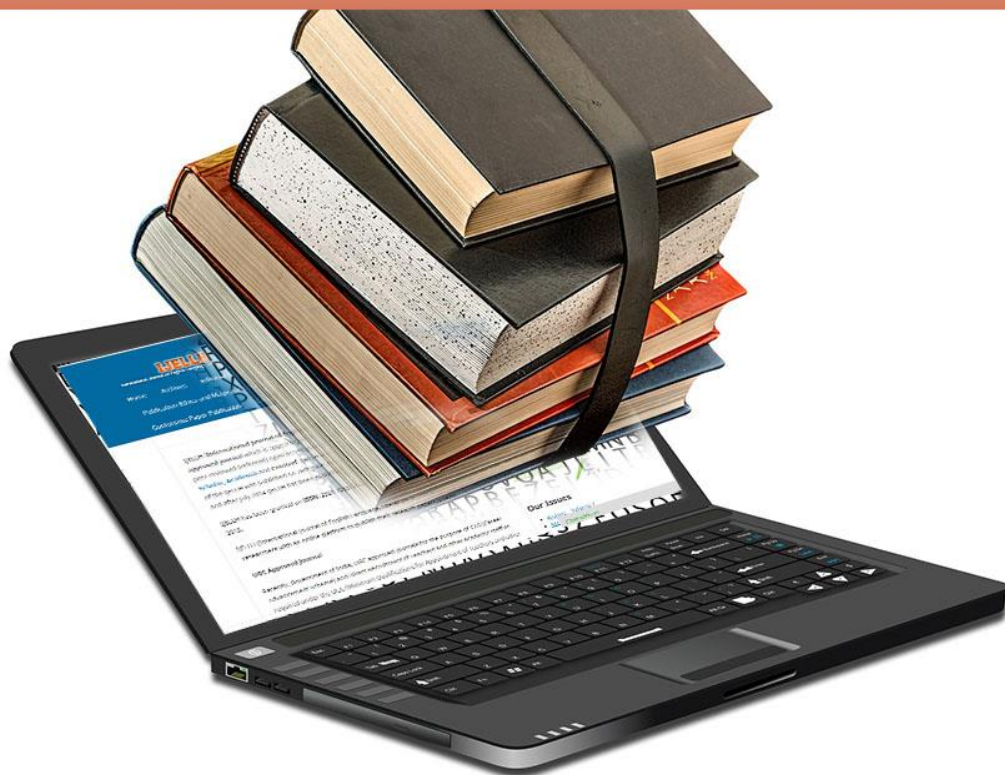
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Voice of the Oppressed: Reflections on a prisoner's life by Alexander Solzhenitsyn in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*

Abstract

Alexander Solzhenitsyn was a Russian engineer, a novelist and a short story writer. He was conferred with a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1970. "*One Day in the Life of Denisovich*" is a short novella by Solzhenitsyn which describes a day's happenings in the life of a prisoner in a Gulag in communist Russia. Solzhenitsyn describes how the communist concentration camps treated their prisoners and how the humanity was massacred within those camps. He does not just stop at criticizing particular people for what was happening in the camp. In the smallest of gestures, This paper is a literary expression of Solzhenitsyn, where he tells us the harsh life of a labor camp in Russia that how dehumanizing that experience was.

Keywords: Alexander Solzhenitsyn, oppression, prison literature

It is often said that the best literature is produced during the hardest of times. Good times do not make for excellent literature. Of course, there are a few examples of such literature, mainly early and late Victorian novelists like Jane Austen managed to create an entire Universe in which the worse that could happen to someone was bruising a knee. But that is an exception that proves the rule. The other great Victorian novelist, Charles Dickens chose the seamiest side of Britain, its great underbelly as his subject and came out with great literature.¹

So did the great Russian novelists. Tolstoy's greatest theme was war and marital strife, Dostoyevsky dealt with the darkest urges of humankind.

Many political ideologies like Nazism and Communism created so much suppression of individual wants and desires that the only way the suppressed could react was by creating, often in secret, great literature which used satire, sarcasm and various figures of speech. George Orwell, Yevgeny Zamyatin are some of the best examples who detailed the cruelty of these suppressive totalitarian regimes in their masterpieces, *1984* and *We*.

A big part of this literature depicting the seamiest side of life was the literature which came out of prisons, out of the experience of the prisoners who somehow escaped the harshest of these prisons. Many innocent victims of the Nazis created great literature and depicted how Germans hated the Jews. Similarly, in Soviet Union, many great litterateurs depicted the atrocity committed upon the hapless victims by a regime which originally claimed to have been working for the people and not against it.

The greatest name to come out of prison literature was that of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Alexander Solzhenitsyn was a Soviet engineer who was put behind bars by the cruel system of concentration camps in Communist Russia. His crime was a lack of complete obedience to the all-powerful communist state. The prisons that he went to were called Gulags. These Gulags were concentration camps which the Soviet communist regime had built to punish anyone who dared defy the all-powerful soviet state.²

As the system grew and the prison populations of these concentration camps soared, Stalin, the supreme leader thought of converting them into profitable ventures by making these prisoners to do forced labor on an industrial scale. Essentially the major industry of Soviet Union shifted to these prisons. The prisoners became the workers of these concentration camps. The conditions of these Gulags were brutal and beyond the limit which humans could endure. On

an average most of the prisoners died within three years of Gulag but as there were many more new incomers the Gulags kept swelling.

“For a quarter of a century, the vast concentration camp system created by Stalin was, directly or indirectly, part of the daily life of all Soviet citizens. There was hardly a family that did not have a son, a husband, a brother, or some other relative in a camp, and the truth of what Solzhenitsyn says has long been known, but not always believed, outside the Soviet Union.”³

It was only when Stalin, the cruelest of the communist dictators of Soviet Union, died, that the cruel system of the Gulags eased a little bit. Many prisoners got amnesty and they were released. Some of them created great literature, like Nadhezdha Mandelstam, Varlam Shalamov, Viktor Kravchenko etc. But the greatest of them all was Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who wrote, *Gulag Archipelago*, the greatest book yet written to describe the communist soviet system of Gulags and the experience of its victims.

However, before writing *Gulag Archipelago*, he became famous with his magnum opus, “*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*” which was his first short novella. It was published by the new Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, who until then thought that Solzhenitsyn is not going to go one step further and will stop before criticizing the very system of communism.

Solzhenitsyn does not just present the situation as a basket case, isolated in its type, but as a phenomenon which was, alas, all too common:

“...Solzhenitsyn goes far beyond the bounds of what had hitherto been permissible in public discussions about the past. He shows that the camps were not an isolated feature in an otherwise admirable society – the unfortunate result of a temporary “infringement of socialist legality” – but that they were in fact, microcosms of that society as a whole.

The novel draws an implicit parallel between life “inside” and “outside” the camp: A day in the life of an ordinary Soviet citizen had much in common with that of this unfortunate fellow countrymen behind barbed wire. We now see that on both sides of the fence it was the same story of material and spiritual squalor, corruption, frustration and terror.” [*Hayward, ix*]

As Max Hayward says the condition of those who lived outside these Gulags were not much better and hence in a way, what Solzhenitsyn has described in *One Day* is also what the common citizen of the communist Soviet Union experienced. It is the literary expression of Alexander Solzhenitsyn which gives voice to the suppressed of his generation in Russia.

The novella describes the happenings in the life of an ordinary prisoner in a Soviet Gulag from the wake up bell in the morning at 05:00 AM which is called as reveille. It is the description of not even a harsh day in the Gulag camps, which were all too normal. It was not even an average day but one of the best days that a prisoner hoped to spend in the system of the Gulag. So if even a best day can be this, day, the reader is forced to think, what a harrowing experience it must be to spend a bad day at a communist forced labor camp like this. In the words of Alexander Tvardovsky:

“He has taken a very ordinary day – from reveille to lights out – in the life of a prisoner. But this ordinary day cannot fail to fill the reader’s heart with bitterness and pain at the fate of these people who come to life before eyes and seem so close to him in the pages of this book. The author’s greatest achievement, however is that this bitterness and pain do not convey a feeling of utter despair. On the contrary. The effect of this novel, which is so unusual for its honesty and harrowing truth, is to unburden our minds of things thus far unspoken, but which had to be said. It thereby strengthens and ennoble us.”⁴

In the smallest of gestures, Solzhenitsyn tells us the harsh life of a labor camp in Russia that how dehumanizing that experience was. One of the most dehumanizing was the constant hunger that plagued everyone in Gulag. There were chronic food shortages in Russia due to its collective farming and there were famines everywhere. But even when there was enough food, the Gulag prisoners were the last priority of a brutal totalitarian regime and thus food was always a scarcity in the Gulags. Solzhenitsyn describes it beautifully in these words: “And the worst thing was that if there was something left in a bowl you started to lick it. You couldn’t help it.”⁵ Where a man is reduced to the indignity of licking food from empty bowls, one can imagine the level to which the state of affairs has degenerated.

Most of the services of the prisoners were created by themselves, as they were the complete rejects of the society and hence others were supposed not to offer any service to them. In the words of Solzhenitsyn, everything inside the Gulags were ‘by the prisoners for the prisoners’, mocking the famous Gettysburg address of Abraham Lincoln. It is by satirizing the prison experience of the Gulags, that Solzhenitsyn creates the literary experience that came out of the communist Russia during the cruel communist years.

Most of these Gulags were situated in the coldest regions of Russia. All of Russia is colder than most countries in the world and some of its regions are the coldest in the world. The Gulags, most of them, were situated in some of the coldest regions of the Arctic, where only Taiga vegetation grew and the Sun did not rise for 22 hours a day in winters. Even in these harsh conditions the prisoners were made to work. The hardest job to do for oneself was to draw water from well, which would often be frozen. “The top of the well was covered by a thick crust of ice so that the bucket would hardly go through the hole. And the rope was stiff as a board.” [*Solzhenitsyn, 11*]

Communism is a natural enemy of religion. It did not just ban the bad aspects of religion in Russia, but as Marx and other great communist and Marxist thinkers had commanded regarding the entirety of religion as evil and something to be persecuted. Religion was much persecuted in Russia by the communist regime. As Christianity was the majority religion there, it was also the one most persecuted. Government enforced atheism was so severe that anyone caught making even a religion gesture was regarded with suspicion of being anti-Party and sometimes arrested. Those areas which had recently come under the Soviet rule during the Second World War had no experience of the irreligiosity of the communists and hence the prisoners from those areas were markedly and visibly more religious than the former residents of Soviet Union.

“On the other side of the table there was a young fellow who was crossing himself before he started to eat. Must have been a Western Ukrainian and new to the place. The Russians didn’t even remember which hand you cross yourself with.” [*Solzhenitsyn*, 16]

The regime was so cruel and privacy had so little space in a communist world that the prisoners were not at all left alone except in the night and they were worked to such exhaustion that they would fall asleep as soon as they would hit the ground. “Apart from sleeping, the prisoners’ time was their own only for ten minutes at breakfast, five minutes at the noon break, and another five minutes at supper.” [*Solzhenitsyn*, 17-18]

Time was a luxury that the prisoners did not have. The cruel communist regime did not leave them any private time to think, to even have an idea of their own self as distinct from the state. As their entire lives was governed by the state, they were not even allowed to have the usual and normal sense of time as we get by watching time in a clock. Instead, they were governed by the prison sense of time which was governed by the specific bells from one chore to other, from one job to another. “There were no clocks ticking here – the prisoners weren’t supposed

to have nay. The powers that be kept time for them.” [Solzhenitsyn, 23] Not just the space, even their time was snatched from them in the Gulag.

Illness was a dangerous business in Gulag. In the worse of the Gulags, prisoners were just worked to death. One day, they would just drop dead. But in the better prisons, like the one in which the eponymous hero Ivan Denisovich was languishing things were much ‘better’ in the macabre Soviet sense. One could consult a doctor but on the pains that if he is not found ill then he will be punished severely. Normally people never complained as the guards and the doctor could report no illness even while there was some, due to the fear of the authorities and then it would be even worse for the victim.

The guards were as cruel as they can get. But a system which was cruel on everyone except the supreme leader, even the guards were working under fear. “The men meant more to a guard than gold. If there was one man missing on the other side of the wire, he’d soon be taking his place.” [Solzhenitsyn, 41]. Very often if they made a mistake, then they could be thrown into the very same prisons which they were guarding, and that would mean sure death for them. So they worked to gladden the authorities and that meant being even more severe on the prisoners.⁶

Physical punishment was not the worst thing that could happen to a prisoner. He was most brutally punished by cutting in the food rations which were already barely above starvation levels. Often the food was nothing but soggy black bread and on a few occasions some soup but often not. This soggy black bread was relished as a great delicacy. “You had to eat with all your thoughts on the food, like he was nibbling off these little bits now, and turn them over on your tongue, and roll them over in your mouth – and then it tasted so good, this soggy black bread. What had he eaten this eight years and more? Nothing at all. But the work he’d done on it!” [Solzhenitsyn, 56-57] Food items which were normally considered only fit for animals to eat, like oat, suddenly became a precious commodity and one would long for them.

Solzhenitsyn with his beautiful literary expression conveys the debilitating use of hunger which the Soviet authorities made and how food became a cult in the prisons. “The prisoners were at their coldest and hungriest when they checked in through these gates in the evening, and their bowl of hot and watery soup without any fat was like rain in a drought. They gulped it down. They cared more for this bowlful than freedom, or for their life in years gone by and years to come. They came back through the gates like soldiers from the wars with a lot of noise and cocky as hell. It was best to keep out of their way.” [*Solzhenitsyn*, 156]

Normally blizzards are considered a plague in Russia where it is too cold but the prisoners of the Gulag prayed for a blizzard because it would mean a brief respite from work. In a world in which the regime is so cruel that these natural wishes and urges of human beings are reversed in nature. Alexander Solzhenitsyn brings this prison experience beautifully in great literary expression.

The prisoners became so central to the Soviet economy that it was in the interest of the government to thrust innocent people in these Gulags to run the economy and industry free of cost. So ten years or even twenty-five in slave labor camps were slapped indiscriminately for negligible or no crimes at all. The law was a hand maiden of the communist Soviet authorities.⁷

In the worst years under Stalin, literary expression was not at all possible and only the toadies, the authors who would produce slavish accounts of the reality to the communist regime would manage to get published. Solzhenitsyn could not publish until Stalin was dead. All foreign countries were demonized, all non-communist ones and any connection with anyone living abroad meant sure trip to the Gulag.

By describing the happenings of a day in the life of a prisoner in the Gulag, Solzhenitsyn with his beautiful literary expression told us how severe life was under the Gulag. “He began to eat. He started with the watery stuff on the top and drank it right down. The warmth went through

his body and his insides were sort of quivering waiting for that gruel to come down. It was great! This was what a prisoner lived for, this one little moment.” [Solzhenitsyn, 175]

One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich is the story of a ‘good’ day, in a ‘good’ prison, of a ‘good’ prisoner. One can only imagine what a bad day would mean for a prisoner in a bad prison. Solzhenitsyn ends the novel with these beautifully frightening words:

“Shukhov went to sleep, and he was very happy. He’d had a lot of luck today. They hadn’t put him in the cooler. The gang hadn’t been chased out to work in the Socialist Community Development. He’d finagled an extra bowl of mush at noon. The boss had gotten them good rates for their work. He’d felt good making that wall. They hadn’t found that piece of steel in the frisk. Caesar had paid him off in the evening. He’d bought some tobacco. And he’d gotten over that sickness.

Nothing had spoiled the day and it had been almost happy.

There were three thousand six hundred and fifty-three days like this in his sentence, from reveille to lights out.

The three extra ones were because of the leap years...” [Solzhenitsyn, 209-210]

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